

# An Interpretation of *A Study of Jewishness* in *Cynthia Ozick's Fiction*

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**Abstract:** *A Study of Jewishness in Cynthia Ozick's Fiction* (2021) is a masterpiece of Chinese research circles on Cynthia Ozick, and the latest contribution made by Chinese scholars to the study of American Jewish literature. This book presents an exhaustive overview of Cynthia Ozick's studies at home and abroad, with emphasis on the Jewishness in Ozick's fiction and it follows the principles of Ethical Literary Criticism in analyzing how Ozick inherits and develops the Jewishness in American Jewish fiction and its literary presentation. The author's 'Midrash' of Cynthia Ozick shows great international perspective and nuanced understanding and empathy. There are three impressive features of the book: Firstly, it is rich in materials with a large number of first-hand foreign research materials, and its content is decorous. The monograph is a comprehensive, systematic, and cutting-edge research in this field, which starts a new situation in the study of Ozick; Secondly, it focuses on Jewishness and its artistic expression in Ozick's fiction by combining historical, cultural, and theoretical research with textual analysis, revealing the rich connotation and internal unity of the works, and demonstrating the researchers' profound and thorough understanding of the research object. Thirdly, it features dialectical thinking. It dialectically analyzes writers and works from multiple perspectives such as feminist criticism, new historicism criticism, postmodern narrative research, and cultural research, and makes horizontal and vertical comparisons in the historical context. The monograph demonstrates well the author's penetrating dialectical thinking.

**Keywords:** *A Study of Jewishness in Cynthia Ozick's Fiction*; Jewishness; Midrash; dialectical thinking

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As the spokesperson of Jews in the postmodern era, Cynthia Ozick (1928– ) is one of the most important Jewish writers in America since the 1970s (2004: 4). Receiving a doctorate in literature from Xiamen University in 2011, Xiao Biao wrote her doctoral dissertation on Cynthia Ozick. Next year, she published a new book: *Highlighting Moral Ethos in Diasporic Space: On the Jewishness in Cynthia Ozick's Fiction*, which is based on her doctoral dissertation. This book profoundly and systematically reveals the connotation and characteristics of



Jewishness in Ozick's fiction by using the theory of diasporic space and combines Ozick's fiction with her view of art, deeply illustrating Cynthia Ozick's literary and cultural significance. It is not only the first English monograph that studies Cynthia Ozick at home, which has changed the situation that "Researches on Ozick have not yet emerged in China" (Yang Renjing preface) but also an important achievement in the study of contemporary American Jewish literature. In 2013, Xiao Biao was approved by the Philosophy and Social Science Foundation of China for the study of Jewishness in Cynthia Ozick's fiction (Project No. 13BWW056). As the final result of this project, the book *The Study of Jewishness in Cynthia Ozick's Fiction* ("Study" for short) was published by the China Social Sciences Press in May this year and has become the latest achievement in the systematic study of Cynthia Ozick's fiction in China, which has made a new contribution to the study of American Jewish literature. In this paper, three impressions of the book will be detailed as follows:

## 1. Rich First-hand Foreign Research Materials

Choosing 13 short stories, 3 novellas, and 5 novels from Cynthia Ozick's works as the target texts, "Study" reviews the history of contemporary Jewish novels' development and sorts out the main characteristics of Jewish literary expression from the non-Jewish dialectical perspective. Besides, by applying the theory of diaspora criticism, "Study" analyzes the Jewishness in Ozick's fiction and summarizes how Ozick inherited and developed the main characteristics of Jewishness in American Jewish fiction from the perspectives of feminist criticism, new historicism, and postmodern narrative research. (Abstract of "Study," 2. The following quotations are all quoted from the same "Study" unless otherwise specified.) It also interprets Jewishness and its manifestation in Ozick's novels and reveals the Jewish thought and cultural tradition reflected in it. In addition to the introduction and conclusion, the main part of "Study" includes: Chapter one "Contemporary American Jewish Novels and their Jewishness in Literature", which clarifies the research background of Jewishness in Ozick's novels; Chapter two "The Anxiety of Creation", discusses Ozick's anxiety about his dual identity between the "Jew" and "writer" and his performance in the novel; Chapter three "Midrashic Literary Writing", analyzes Ozick's "Midrashic" literary narration and interpretation of Jewish history and stance; Chapter four "The Writing of History and Nature from the Perspective of Pan/Moses", examines Jewish history in a multicultural context and explores the Jewish character reflected in the writing of history and nature from the perspective of Pan/Moses; Chapter five "Eros of Ideas", analyzes the Jewishness of the female representation in Ozick's novels. Compared with other similar monographs, Study has adopted a large number of first-hand foreign research materials as we can find a lot of ink on the part of the literature review. These literature materials are not only diversified in form (including network literature) but also rich and original in content. There are 38 pages in "Cynthia Ozick research overview" in Study's introduction part (from page 10 to page 47) and 38 pages in references (from page 260 to page 297), which make up about a quarter of the book's length (300 pages in total). From the discussion above, it can be said the author of "Study" has done a lot of preliminary research and preparation work for the study of Cynthia Ozick. The collection of materials in "Study" is impressive, especially the foreign resources: 91 foreign books, 23 foreign chapters, 51 foreign dissertations, and 154 foreign journal articles. The frontier research materials alone have greatly expanded the horizons of scholars and laid the foundation for "Study" to become a comprehensive, systematic, and cutting-edge research in this field, which has created favorable conditions for the

new pattern of Ozick research. At the beginning of her writing, Ozick positioned herself as an American writer. A few years later, she redefined herself as a Jewish writer, emphasizing her Jewish identity. Quoting the opinions of many famous Jewish literary critics such as Harold Bloom, Louis Harap, Sanford Pinsker, Alvin Rosenfeld, and Ruth Wisse, "Study" clearly points out: "The distinctive Jewishness is not only the most attractive part of Ozick's fiction but also the limitation of her fiction." (11) "Through maintaining the profound historical and moral consciousness of Jewishness, Ozick superimposes and expands the main features of Jewish literature in contemporary Jewish novels, which inherits and enriches the connotation of Jewish literature." (252) "The driving force of Ozick's literary creation stems from the anxiety generated by her inner conflicts. However, these conflicts are not analyzed and explained further in academic circles." (11) This is precisely where Xiao Biao's research steps in. If Ozick's literary creation "fundamentally changed our definition to American Jewish literature" (1), "Study" changed our comments on Ozick in the final analysis, because it follows the principles of Ethical Literary Criticism, not only illustrating the characteristics of Ozick's creation but also analyzing how and why these features are generated.

## 2. Definite Focus on Ozick's Unique Jewishness

Ethical Literary Criticism is a literary criticism method that is formed by integrating literary research methods on the basis of drawing on merits from ethical methods. Ethical Literary Criticism "not only makes a historical and dialectical interpretation to the moral phenomena described in literary history but also insists on making a value judgment on the moral phenomena described in current literature by virtue of realistic moral values." (2012: 48) "By applying the methods of the aesthetic judgment and artistic imagination to the study of literature" (2012: 48), Ethical Literary Criticism is the pursuit of the truth of life depicted in literature, aiming at revealing the complex ethical characteristics of literature. From the standpoint of artistic fiction, Ethical Literary Criticism probes into the ethical and moral phenomena in literary works, focusing on the analysis, interpretation, and understanding of various ethical phenomena depicted in literary works. Its perspective and position are both historical and present. Following the principles of Ethical Literary Criticism, "Study" combines historical, cultural, and theoretical research with text analysis, focuses on the Jewishness and its artistic expression in Ozick's fiction, and reveals the rich connotation and internal unity of the works, fully displaying researcher's profound and thorough understanding to research object. The history of American literature tells us that the "first generation" of American Jewish writers tended to the Jewish traditions in their confrontation with the mainstream culture. While the "second generation" American Jewish writers gradually adapted to the American society and became an important part of it in the continuous contact with the American mainstream society. The "first generation" and "second generation" American Jewish writers have their own generational characteristics, which are formed under the changing social and historical conditions. They shouldered missions and responsibilities of their own times, writing the history of the Jewish nation. In the confrontation with the American mainstream culture, the "first generation" American Jewish writers tended to show the writing characteristics of the Jewish tradition. Compared with the "first generation" writers' works, the "second generation" writers' have a greater and broader influence on American society, because what they discussed are not only the issues of Jewishness, identity, and the trauma caused by the Holocaust but also the crisis that the Jewish people were assimilated

increasingly, which shows that they began to write mainstream literature. With Saul Bellow and Isaac Bashevis Singer winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1976 and 1978 respectively, American Jewish literature had reached its peak in the 1970s. Since the 1980s, the works of the “third-generation” American Jewish writers have been published and won prizes, bringing about worldwide attention. The goal of their works is always to promote Jewish ethics. The essence of Jewishness in Jewish literature lies in the digestion and application of the Jewish cultural elements in the manner of literature as well as the comprehensive national quality reflected in it. Among the elements of Jewish culture, the core significance is the thoughts including subaltern identity in nationality, the view of voters and eschatology, the history of vagrancy and its psychological thinking, values, national customs, and so on. (2004: 27) In this definition, Professor Liu Hongyi categorizes religious factors into cultural elements. The practice of interpreting “Jewishness” from the cultural level is likely to confuse the readers with religious “Jewishness” and cultural “Jewishness,” resulting in a feeling of ambiguity. In Professor Qiao Guoqiang’s view, “Jewishness” reflected in contemporary American Jewish literature mainly refers to:

Generally speaking, an idea, which is expressed in the works of Jewish writers in connection with Jewish culture or religion, mainly reflects the way of thinking, psychological mechanism of a Jewish writer or their characters, and anything that can express the characteristics of Jewish life, character, language, behavior, scene, etc. Therefore, “Jewishness” can be classified into two levels, namely the Jewishness of religious level and the Jewishness of cultural level. (2008: 17–18)

Professor Qiao Guoqiang provides a reference standard for us to investigate the “Jewishness” of specific American Jewish writers from the two aspects of religion and culture. No matter what they write or how they write, the goal of American Jewish writers’ works is always to popularize a Jewish ethical relationship. The works of American Jewish writers directly or indirectly express a kind of Jewish complex, reflecting the cultural deposits of their own nation. This is of great importance to the further study of American Jewish literature. As for “Jewishness,” “Study” points out: “She (Ozick) believes that ‘Jewishness originates from covenant thought’, mainly in the form of the following: firstly, historical consciousness; secondly, anti-idolatry; thirdly, identify differences; fourthly, the persistence of learning.” (50) “The most fundamental and central feature of Jewishness, in Ozick (3)’s view, is the observance of the covenant, devoutly observing the covenant with God” (50). As one of the representatives of the third generation of American Jewish writers, Ozick’s works present “real Jewish characteristics” and “stand out because of his strong Jewish character” (6). “The return of Jewishness is a prominent theme in contemporary American Jewish literature. In this respect, Ozick is the trendsetter and the navigator. Ozick advocates highlighting the nationality through literary practice,” and believes that “under the diasporic background, the creation or thought must highlight the Jewish nationality if it wants to be immortal” (8). Continuing to expand the critical keyword “Jewishness” is premised on the full understanding of its complex germination and formation mechanism. Therefore, rooted in the soil of Jewish culture, Ozick extracted materials from the rich national historical books, myths, and legends and creatively combined these materials with the reality of Jewish immigrants’ lives, creating “Liturgical Literature” under the new historical conditions. (Based on Jewish morality, Liturgical Literature takes Jewish history as background and New Dish as a carrier). The most typical liturgical literary text can be traced to the Hebrew Bible, which is a 24-volume book born in an era of absolute belief in monotheism. Most of the works are filled with the Jewish thought of “monotheism,” nationality, patriotism, and the spirit of martyrdom. Ozick shows a firm attitude on the sensitive

issues of identity, and she is not shy away from being a Jew at all: “Let others strive to be novelists who happen to be a Jew by birth, but I am a Jew at first, then I can begin to write” (1983: 188).

“As for Jews, the best and perhaps the most concise description is that the Jews are the people who reject idols.” (77) “As a Jew, Ozick persisted in her resistance to idolatry; As a writer, Ozick is in danger of becoming an idol maker. The duality of identity and the conflict between Jewish ethics and aesthetic practice give rise to the anxiety of Ozick creation” (77). In virtue of Levinas’ theory of ethical poetics, we can speculate on Ozick’s “creative anxiety”: Art creates the environment by image, freezes time in the image, copies existence mechanically and makes existence rigid. Literary characters are imprisoned in an inhuman space, like prisoners in Plato’s cave who are lost in the real world when facing images. The dangers of idol worship are revealed in Psalm 115 Verse 8 in *The Bible*, “They that make them are like unto them; s is every one that trusteth in them.” This is the fate of man in the face of images. In *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (1964), McLuhan proposed the concepts of image Extension, paralysis, and servo mechanism. After quoting the commandments of the Bible, McLuhan further explained the inverted subject-object relationship: “Watching these idols...The result is obedience to idols...This is the reality of sensory ‘closure’ “(1964: 50). Watching idols causes people to obey idols and causes sensory closure. In order to cope with this situation, one must create new extensions and trigger a new round of closure (1964: 46). The relationship between human and image extension forms a closed loop of interactive reflection and circulation. Through novel narration, the existence is claustrophobic in an isolated and insulated constancy, especially the characters in the novel, all becoming claustrophobic existences and trapped prisoners. This is the myth or the violent nature of literary myth.

“Anti-idol” is of great significance to the Jewish community and the survival of Jewish literature in today’s America. In Ozick’s view, “the same precepts against idolatry apply unconditionally to Jewish American novelists today” (50). In literary writing, Ozick launched into a discussion of “iconoclastic literature.” She uses “Pilpul” to disintegrate the elements involved in the creation and “imagine creation as an accident caused by non-subjective intention” (79). “The images of the creators created by Ozick seem to lack intrinsic motivation and subjective will in their creative behaviors.” (79). While criticizing the physical idol, Ozick also intended to discover and ensure the enduring value of American Jewish culture, making American literature reexamine and absorb the Jewish tradition. She put forward such ideas as “literature is an idol” and “Liturgical Literature.” Ozick pulls away Puttermesser’s subjective well as the creator and the conscious efforts put into, which reflects literary imagination of the possibility from Ozick who trapped into creation anxiety: separating creation, creativity, and subjective will from the conscious efforts invested in it. Contrary to the reason, it is a possibility for her to eliminate creation anxiety” (80). Another way to dissolve the anxiety of creation is to negate and deconstruct the identity of the protagonist and the identity of the artistic creator (81). In the early years, Ozick struggled with the conflict between “Jewishness” and the “imagination” necessary for writing. Ozick thought deeply about Jewish literary culture, and she “read mainly to discover...the Jewish mindset” (51). “At the beginning of the career, Ozick identified herself as an American writer; six years later she reidentified herself as a Jewish writer, emphasizing her Jewish identity” (4). It is this Jewishness that sets Ozick apart from other Jewish writers. In a manifesto published in 1970, Ozick launch a scathing attack on some American Jewish writers who ignored Jewish identity and tended to integrate with the American mainstream: “Our voices sound distant. But if we choose the whole human rather than the Jews...Our voices will be completely lost ” (1996:

120). Aylan M. Koval said it well:

Our postmodern society is faced with another historical phenomenon—the impulse to assimilate, which will affect not only Jewish history but also American history. Ozick’s description of this phenomenon applies particularly to the Jewish experience, and it can also apply to all cultures and a struggle, in which all cultures must wage a war on assimilation to keep traditions alive and make histories meaningful. (1996: x xi)

In an age of declining faith, Ozick advocated “Liturgical Literature” with Jewish values. “It is a form of literature, an idea.... It reflects a common voice: the echo of history” (8), which pointed to the moral direction for Jewish writers’ literary writing, and set off a new style of writing with Jewish spirit in the field of Jewish literature in the 20th century. As Ozick advocates the use of “moral imagination” and popularizes the form and function of “Liturgical Literature,” the return of Jewishness becomes the new core tension of contemporary American Jewishness literature, promoting the development of contemporary American Jewish literature, which is still thriving. “It shook the 20th-century American literary world with its strong moral force” (2008: 245), and “opened up a new direction” for American Jewish literature. (2002: 267).

The monograph of Xiao Biao studies how Ozick inherits and expresses Jewishness through “putting the study of Jewishness in Ozick’s fiction into the context of American Jewish novels and Jewish literature,” which not only seizes the individual characteristics of the object and cultural qualities but also reflects the historical context and the wind of age representing Cynthia Ozick’s literary creation.

### 3. Dialectical Thinking from Multiple Perspectives

“Study” dialectically analyzes writers and works from multiple perspectives such as feminist criticism, new historicism criticism, postmodern narrative research, and cultural research, and makes horizontal and vertical comparisons in historical context. The monograph demonstrates well the author’s penetrating dialectical thinking.

“Study” discusses three sets of dialectical contradictions in Ozick’s fiction: firstly, the inner contradiction between writer and Jewish identity; secondly, the conflict between non-Jewish culture and Jewish culture in the diasporic context, namely the conflict between Pan and Moses; thirdly, the contradiction between feminist thought and orthodox Jewish sexism. “Study” digs deep into the root of the way of expressing contradiction in Ozick’s fiction—taking “Pilpul” as the core. “Pilpul” is the “dialectical philosophical approach used to deal with disputes and conflicts by Jewishness,” and is characterized by “debates that transcend space and time” (55). “Study” points out that drawing nourishment from the Jewish cultural tradition, Ozick practices the Jewish thinking mode by virtue of Jewish logic wisdom “Pilpul,” and dialectically reveals and resolves the three groups of contradictions in her fiction.

“Third-generation” American Jewish writers not only pay attention to the life state and trauma of the Holocaust survivors but also began to review the changes of the times and the influence of the American mainstream society in a rational view. Compared with the former generation, the new generation of American Jews has a weaker sense of identity and national cohesion, but the Holocaust shadows still linger. The new generation of American Jewish writers has a strong sense of national identity. They convey the powerful vitality

of the Jewish nation to readers through their works. Ozick “regards the Holocaust as the central event in Jewish history” and her fiction involves the contents of the Holocaust in various degrees and adds narration and reflection on the Holocaust. After analyzing the two counter figures in “*The Suitcase*,” “Study” writes that “it is the suffering of the Holocaust that separates the Jews from the non-Jews” (173). Stanislaw Lushinski in the novella “*A Mercenary*” “tells Ozick’s understanding of Jewish cultural specificity: the historical consciousness of Jewish culture cannot be erased or changed by any external force... Historical consciousness has become the collective cultural gene implanted in the bone marrow of Jews” (177) and “historical consciousness has become the identity symbols of Jews” (189). The Jewishness of the Jewish nation connects the Jews scattered throughout the world in a religious sense. It is for this reason that American Jewish literature is based on the Jewishness of Jews. After analyzing *Puttermesser and Xanthippe*, *Trust*, and *Puttermesser in Paradise*, “Study” concludes:

In Ozick’s fiction, the reconstruction of Jewish national history and the imagination of personal history present a contradictory position of both construction and questioning and deconstruction. The position of construction shows Ozick’s strong sense of Jewish history. The position of questioning and deconstruction shows Ozick’s judgment and interpretation of the fabricated history. It means that Ozick resists the historical art in history writing, and falls into the Jewish position of idolatry through history fabrication. The writing to nature in Ozick’s fiction presents the contradictory attitude of resisting and compromising nature and reflects the different stances of Jewish culture toward nature.

In *Levitation*, Ozick portrays Lucy, a female figure who is suppressed by Jewish marriage. This suppression is disastrous: the power of discourse is lost, the subjectivity is stripped away, and the thought is annihilated. (222) “In the face of the conflict and opposition between orthodox Judaism and feminist thought, on the one hand, Ozick clearly expresses her disagreement with feminist thought, sharing her ideal of pursuing gender equality; On the other hand, Ozick calls for a reformation of the orthodox Jewish view of women and practices the idea that taking thought as the carrier of vitality, the thought of the ‘Eros of thought’ ” (215). Lucy’s journey of thought is Ozick’s practice and triumph of the ‘Eros of thought’ (225). Ozick’s *Jewish Clay Figure* “deconstructs the patriarchal nature of the Jewish clay Figure legend and realizes the feminist literary rewrite of the orthodox Jewish view of women” (230). It shows the “powerful self-improvement ability of Jewish culture” (232), and reflects the unique character of Jewish culture: “fusion without melting, fusion without dying” (231). The mother in *Cannibal Galaxy* is “androgynous” and “represents the defining characteristics of a Jewish women— like a man...has a strong sense and ability of rational thinking” (242). In *The Shawl*, the Jewish mother Rosa’s thinking and judgement under the desperate situation of survival in the Holocaust “presents the features of significant dialectical opposition; ...which rewrites the traditional paradigm of motherhood” (250). The polyphonic features of *The Pagan Rabbi* are “on the one hand, the result of Ozick’s detailed literary interpretation by using Jewish “Pilpul” to realize the potential divergence and opposition between “imagination” and “Jewishness;” On the other hand, are... the judgment and interpretation of the reconstructed Jewish nation history” (258).

In this way, “Study” reviews the Jewishness and the literary expression in Ozick’s fiction highlights Ozick’s unique Jewishness, and analyses the way to achieve the unity of ideology and artistry on the basis of exploring Ozick’s literary view, natural view, and female view. The most important part of literary criticism is the literary evaluation, that is, value judgment, which is rooted in certain values. Ethical Literary Criticism is to interpret

literary works in a positive way, reanalyze and criticize literary works, and write a new literary instruction manual. Ethical Literary Criticism was founded on the basis of inheriting the tradition of Chinese moral criticism and drawing lessons from western ethical criticism, which has also promoted the innovation of Chinese literary criticism theory. The Chinese version of Cynthia Ozick's "Midrash" in "Study" reflects the author's very broad international vision and meticulous understanding and empathy, conforming to the principles of Ethical Literary Criticism. The study of English literature in the Chinese context should "insist on the orientation of China's practical problems and emphasize the applied value of foreign literature research" (2015: 2). "At present, China's literary criticism is lacking ethical and moral values. Therefore, our literary criticism should shoulder moral responsibility to realize the return of literary ethical and moral values, and Ethical Literary Criticism is an important way to achieve this goal" (2012: 47). In the theoretical construction and critical practice of foreign literature research, important issues that literary criticism researchers should keep on paying attention to and thinking about are to criticize what value orientation and standard should be upheld and how to play the value leading role better, making it participate in the construction of Chinese ethics and morality in the new era. In this regard, "Study" gives a convincing answer, that is, "expected to provide a useful reference for realizing the manifestation of national literature" (4).

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